

Chickens Lack the Most Basic Legal Protection: The Right to Humane Slaughter

From [Vicky Bond, Earth/Food/Life, A project of Independent Media Institute](#)

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Despite their ability to [think and feel](#), [billions](#) of chickens are raised and killed for food each year and subjected to some of the worst living and slaughter conditions imaginable to meet the increasing demand for meat worldwide.



Introduction

Chickens are the [most populous](#) bird on Earth and are widely considered among the most abused animals on the planet. Despite their ability to [think and feel](#), [billions](#) of chickens are raised and killed for food each year and subjected to some of the worst living and slaughter conditions imaginable to meet the increasing demand for meat worldwide.

Chickens are complex social and emotional beings. Research indicates that [chickens are not simple-minded creatures](#), which is an assumption many make.

“[S]cientists have learned that this bird can be deceptive and cunning, that... [they possess] communication skills on par with those of some primates and that... [they use] sophisticated signals to convey... [their] intentions,” according to the [Scientific American](#). “When making decisions, the chicken takes into account... [their] own prior experience and knowledge surrounding the situation. ... [Chickens] can solve complex problems and [empathize] with individuals... [who] are in danger.”

Miserable Lives Trapped in Factory Farms

A 2019 analysis by Sentience Institute estimated that [99 percent](#) of all birds raised for food spend their lives trapped in [factory farms](#). Broiler chickens—the industry term for birds raised for meat—suffer through harrowing living conditions every day of their short lives.

Most of these chickens are born in industrial [hatcheries](#), surrounded by bright lights and machines. The baby birds never meet their mothers—the industry separates unhatched chicks from mother hens as soon as the eggs are laid. Soon after hatching, these birds are packed into cramped crates and shipped to factory farms.

Once at the factory farm, the chickens suffer extreme stress from [overcrowding](#). Sometimes, [hundreds of thousands](#) of birds are kept in a single shed. The birds endure filthy living conditions, surrounded by their waste. These dirty, crowded environments are notorious for [breeding and spreading zoonotic diseases](#), such as [bird flu](#), which threaten the well-being of humans and chickens alike.

The meat industry breeds chickens to [grow at an unnatural rate](#) to yield the biggest profits. This high speed of growth often results in painful health problems for them, including skeletal disorders, skin burns, lesions of the foot pad, and heart attacks. These birds are bred to grow so fast that their legs often lack the strength to carry their heavy bodies—some [struggle even to walk or stand](#). They often experience painful lameness as a result of this.

Most chickens are sent to slaughter at [less than two months old](#). Despite their large size, they're ultimately still babies at the time of their death.

Chickens Are Killed Inhumanely

Chickens face a [grisly end](#) to their short and unnatural lives on industrial farms. We cannot know for sure if chickens are aware they are going to be slaughtered, but we can be certain that they experience fear and [pain](#) as they are shackled upside down and surrounded by the smell of death.

After a stressful journey to the slaughterhouse trapped in cramped crates, workers remove the birds and shackle them upside down by their feet during a process known as [live-shackle slaughter](#). In this process—[one of the standard methods of slaughtering](#) chickens—many birds flap their wings in terror and endure [broken bones](#) and other injuries.

The birds move along an automated line and are immersed in a pool of electrified water intended to leave them unconscious, but this system often does not work as planned. [Evidence](#) reveals that the stunning method the poultry industry uses does not consistently render birds unconscious. More than [half a million](#) chickens drowned in scalding tanks in 2019, according to distressing figures from the United States Department of Agriculture.

Shortly after stunning, a sharp blade slits their throats to allow them to bleed out.

Finally, the chickens' bodies are submerged in boiling water to loosen the feathers from their skin before a de-feathering machine plucks them entirely. If a chicken is not adequately stunned or bled out before entering the scalding tank, she will spend her final moments being boiled alive.

The USDA inspectors found extensive [violations](#) during their inspection of slaughterhouses in 2021. These included birds who evaded slaughter being boiled alive in the de-feathering phase, as well as live birds being left among the dead, along with other horrifying abuses.

The Profit Motive: Choosing Cruelty Over Care

Researchers have found that water baths with [lower electrical frequencies](#) are more effective at stunning birds. However, they can sometimes damage carcasses, making the meat unsuitable for sale.

These low-frequency shocks can induce spasms during the stunning process, [resulting](#) in fractured limbs and ruptured blood vessels, which reduces the birds' economic value to the industry.

Researchers believe that, despite these injuries, low-frequency water baths reduce the overall suffering of birds during the slaughter process because they are more likely to stun the birds successfully. However, most [slaughter facilities](#) still opt for less effective stunning methods due to concerns about meat quality.

Because the poultry industry values profit over welfare, countless birds used for their flesh suffer a horrible death while sometimes fully conscious. And since poultry are excluded from the [Humane Slaughter Act](#), virtually no legislation ensures the humane slaughter of chickens. A 2016 HuffPost [article](#) stated, "If just 1 percent of chickens raised each year in the U.S. are not effectively stunned, it means roughly 90 million animals are experiencing a violent and painful death."

In Europe, [controlled atmosphere stunning](#) (CAS) is becoming a more prevalent method of slaughter. This approach involves gassing the birds into unconsciousness. CAS is considered more humane and a much less stressful experience for the birds since they can be stunned without shackling.

Egg-Laying Hens Are Cruelly Killed, Too

Many people are unaware that [egg-laying hens](#) ultimately meet a similar fate. Once their egg production declines, they are considered useless to the industry and sent to slaughter.

[Male chicks](#) born into the egg industry suffer one of the darkest fates of all animals used in our modern food system. As the eggs hatch, workers place birds on a conveyor belt to be "[sexed](#)." Female chicks are set aside to be shipped off to egg facilities, but male chicks have no economic use in the industry.

In most hatcheries, workers toss male chicks into macerating machines where they are ground alive.

Consumer Awareness and Pressure Helps Reduce Animal Cruelty

Fast-food chains use chicken suppliers that practice live-shackle slaughter. McDonald's, for example, is the world's [second-largest purchaser of chicken](#). According to a 2021 Sentient Media report, the birds slaughtered for McDonald's meals have continued to face cruelty. The fast-food chain has no minimum space or natural light requirement, and an inhumane slaughter process. "While McDonald's may have tried to address the growing demand for better animal welfare, the measures have been largely inadequate," the [report](#) stated.

Due to consumer pressure and increasing awareness, McDonald's and hundreds of food companies have publicly agreed to the standards of the [Better Chicken Commitment](#), which includes a transition away from cruel live-shackle slaughter.

According to a 2023 [report](#), while some leading food companies have made progress in fulfilling these commitments, others have not been transparent about their progress toward achieving “their chicken welfare goals.”

Ensuring Humane Treatment of Chickens

Chickens are [intelligent and social animals](#) capable of nuanced thoughts and feelings. However, the [modern poultry industry](#) treats them as commodities, not sentient beings.

The unnatural growth rate of chicken causes immense pain and discomfort—just to maximize industry profits. The brutal slaughter of each bird marks the end of a life of tremendous suffering. For billions of sentient birds, the slaughterhouse is an excruciating end to a miserable and short life trapped in our broken food system.

Chickens deserve better than this horrific violence. Concerned consumers can [call on the chicken industry to end this cruelty](#) and adopt better industry standards to ensure improved treatment of these birds.